

## Primitivist Modernism and Imperialist Colonialism

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# PRIMITIVIST MODERNISM AND IMPERIALIST COLONIALISM: THE VIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN JOSÉ MORENO VILLA'S *PRUEBAS DE NUEVA YORK* AND JULIO CAMBA'S *LA CIUDAD AUTOMÁTICA*

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## Abstract

In the first decades of the twentieth century, New York City captured the attention of numerous Spanish writers who visited the city and wrote of their experience in the form of travelogues. In this article, I will discuss two of these texts: *Pruebas de Nueva York* (1927) by José Moreno Villa and *La ciudad automática* (1932) by Julio Camba. In particular, I will focus on the representation of African Americans carried out by these two writers. Whereas Black art was regarded as an essential source of inspiration for Modernism, the view of Black individuals as “subaltern others” was rarely challenged; on the contrary it was often reinforced by the artistic appropriation of African art by the European avant-garde. The view of Blacks as an inferior “race” is one of a series of pervasive discourses of “Otherness” deeply ingrained in Western modernity, which served as justification for imperial colonization and domination, to the extent that “racial” difference and inequality –especially in the case of Black people– was considered as a taken for granted truth which was barely questioned, if at all. This article will show the influence of these two coordinates of Western modernity –Primitivist Modernism and imperialist colonialism– in both travelogues, which in spite of their different approach to the situation of African Americans in New York, share a number of similarities that can also be found in other coetaneous literary works. Rather than qualifying these attitudes as merely racist –although these texts certainly contain racist and colonialist overtones– the article will highlight the strength of discourses of “Otherness” in Western thought, which resist being challenged even when Black art is incorporated to the artistic vocabulary of Modernism.

**Keywords:** New York, José Moreno Villa, Julio Camba, Modernism, primitivism, colonialism, travel writing.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, New York City became a fashionable theme in a flurry of Spanish travelogues.<sup>1</sup> Whereas critical attention to the presence of this city in Spanish letters has been traditionally limited to the study of *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (1916) by Juan Ramón Jiménez and *Poeta en Nueva York* (published posthumously in 1940) by Federico García Lorca, the literary corpus of Spanish travel writing about New York has often been overlooked or neglected due to the alleged lack of literary value commonly associated with this genre. On the contrary, I propose that this corpus provides an important insight into the cultural debates on Spanish modernity in the early twentieth century. In this article, I will focus on the

representation of African Americans in of *Pruebas de Nueva York* (1927) by José Moreno Villa and *La ciudad automática* (1932) by Julio Camba,<sup>2</sup> with the intention of showing not only the influence of the so-called Primitivist Modernism on early twentieth century Spanish writers, but also how these texts reflect the widespread view at the time of Black people as an inferior “race”, and therefore the impact that pervasive colonial discourses deeply ingrained in Western thought had upon Spanish Modernism. In spite of their different approaches to African Americans, both travelogues perpetuate the binary opposition between “civilized” European “races” and the alleged primitivism of African Americans, therefore showing the intersections between Modernism and Imperialism, even when Black or “primitive art” is praised for its purity and originality and regarded as the main influence for avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Surrealism.

### **“Primitivist Modernism” and its influence on early twentieth-century Spanish literature**

As it has been extensively studied, primitivism became a source of inspiration for the European avant-garde, which embraced the view of Negro art as a sort of “primitive regeneration” (Rasula 16).<sup>3</sup> A key text of the time, Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1926, 1928), captured the sense of disenchantment that invaded Europe in the first decades of the last century, especially after the First World War. The reaction in the arts to such a crisis, in the form of Modernism, denounced the decadence of modern life, as Marshall Berman points out: “in the name of values that modernity itself has created” (Berman 23). Modernist art combined images of simultaneous rejection and acceptance of urban life and resorted to so-called primitive art in order to express its uneasiness with modern life and society. As a consequence, “the present was affirmed (and much of it denounced) by blending primitivist regeneration with futurist longing” and “the paradox of an urban jungle emerged, often under the sign of jazz” (Rasula 27). However, at the same time that these artistic explorations of the so-called primitive sought to subvert cultural oppositions, Primitivist Modernism also involved “a revulsion against crossover, a fear of dissolution and confusion, a contrary drive precisely to shore up these boundaries” (Jervis 76). One must remember that the creation of a dialectics of alterity was essential to the formation of Western modernity. The figure of the uncivilised native was used as the axis for the opposition between “civilised nations” and “savages and barbarians”: whereas the Old Continent represented civilisation and culture, colonised lands were depicted as the territory of primitivism, “the ‘dark’

side – forgotten, repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity” (Hall 313-314).

The admiration for primitive art and the fascination with jazz music coincided with the increasing interest raised by the United States in Europe, as reflected in texts such as *Amerika* (1927) by Franz Kafka, *New York* (1929) by Paul Morand, *Scènes de la vie future* (1930) by George Duhamel, and *The New America, the New World* (1935) by H. G. Wells, amongst others.<sup>4</sup> The image of the United States promoted by European thinkers and writers did not reflect the reality of this country but rather worked as a *third image*, “a counter-image, developed by Europeans for their own social world” (Wagner 115). This contrapuntal view of the United States was twofold. On the one hand, America represented an innovative architecture, a new social organisation and the site of astonishing technological developments. New York, in particular, was characterised as an avant-garde city, in Francis Picabia’s words, “la ciudad cubista, la ciudad futurista. Su arquitectura, su vida y su espíritu expresan el sentimiento moderno” (quoted from Cañas 35). On the other, “Americanisation” was seen as tantamount to decay, amongst other reasons, because of the incipient multiculturalism of US society and the visibility of Black individuals in American metropolis. The United States were seen as the repository of the purity of Aryan blood in the modern world, as a young nation founded on the “supremacy” of the white Anglo-Saxon “race” over the so-called “inferior races”. However, democracy, equality, and the practice of “racial” intermixing represented a contaminating threat for the hegemony of the white “race”, and therefore it was also believed that:

by allowing the increasing homogenization of blood types that shaped its vitality, America was falling to the ranks of the mediocre among the nations of the world. America, with its foundation in the rationalist ideas of equality and unity of the human species, was slowly destroying itself. (Ceaser 1997: 88)

While the European avant-garde incorporated images of primitivism and the language of jazz music, references to American multiculturalism also became a recurrent issue in European accounts of this country, especially in travel writing. For example, Paul Morand devotes long passages of his travelogue *New York* (1929) to describe the co-existence of different ethnicities in New York streets, where “there are no dividing lines between these races living within a few yards of each other, but nothing could mix them” (Morand 85). *Scènes de la vie future* (1930) by George Duhamel is also replete with references to the so-called “Negro problem”. Duhamel’s account poses the alleged dangers of “racial” contact in “this big, mixed America where the races, brought

face to face, have not sought to understand each other, and have not succeeded in loving one another” (Duhamel 148).

The work of early twentieth-century Spanish writers reflected similar tendencies. Modernist authors such as Juan Ramón Jiménez, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Francisco Ayala, José Moreno Villa and Federico García Lorca, amongst others, not only mirrored the negrophilia of the European avant-garde, but also represented Black people and the so-called primitive art in their writings. In his article “Temas de arte. El arte negro, factor moderno”, published in *El Sol* in 1925, Moreno Villa argues that the origins of modern art –of Cubism in particular– are to be found in Negro art (273-279). Furthermore, Spanish avant-garde artists were also captivated by jazz music. Ballesteros y Neira (20, 52) argue that jazz was often played in the *Residencia de Estudiantes*, a fact also confirmed by Isabel Pérez Villanueva Tovar (217). Gómez de la Serna devoted two chapters of *Ismos* (1931) to “Negrismo” and “Jazzbandismo” respectively, in which he captured the essence of the attraction that the avant-garde experienced towards primitivism as a purer and primordial artistic expression, in contrast with the decadence of Western art:

en esa obscuridad de su raza y de su ignorancia han resuelto los problemas escultóricos de un modo que yo llamaría *terrible*. Encarados en la plástica humana, sin la coquetería que se podría llamar europea y que lo prejuzga siempre todo, han hallado los rasgos espantosos del ser humano y sus descaros y sus terribles cataduras y la base simiesca de su armazón. Han llegado con una sinceridad y una verdad tan grande en el descubrimiento de los *tipos humanos*, que son verdaderos ejemplos de exaltación del *carácter* (Gómez de la Serna 130).

Gómez de la Serna’s assessment of primitive art encapsulates the inherent contradiction of Primitivist Modernism: whereas Black art is praised for its naturalness and raw expressivity, these qualities are explained by its ignorance and lack of civilization. Similar arguments can be found in Moreno Villa’s article, where he states that:

Ninguno daba en creer que tales fetiches bárbaros, tales productos maravillosos de la humanidad inocente, encerraban el total. Semejante creencia hubiera indicado debilidad senil. Lo que veían y lo que deben realmente a los escultores negros es la preocupación salvadora, el ansia de conseguir los principios básicos del arte (Moreno Villa 276).

Likewise, the cinematic tribute that Francisco Ayala devotes to Josephine Baker in *Indagación del cinema* (1929), combines appraisal for the famous dancer with statements in which there is a certain colonial overtone clearly influenced by Western discourses of “Otherness”, such as:

“Josefina –los negros– un grito raro y violento, de selva” (149), “la inimitable zalamería de los negros” (150) and “una sirena con ojos almendra, con sonrisas de cuchillo, coqueta como un mono” (151). García Lorca’s representation of Black people in *Poeta en Nueva York* contains similar contradictions. The “primitive” –embodied by “El rey del Harlem” (125-132) and the African mask of “Danza de la muerte” (137-141)– reacts against the dehumanization of the modern metropolis and purifies New York’s mechanized society. Lorca’s powerful image of New York being destroyed by the anger of nature out of control led by a dancing African mask, is reminiscent of the more subtle contrast made by Juan Ramón Jiménez in “La negra y la rosa” (142-143) between the mechanization represented by the underground and the beauty and spirituality of the Black lady and her rose, which also take over and purify the mechanical environment surrounding them, although in a more delicate manner: “Y la rosa emana, en el silencio atento, una delicada esencia y eleva como una bella presencia inmaterial que se va adueñando de todo, hasta que el hierro, el carbon, los periódicos, todo, huele un punto a rosa blanca, a primavera mejor, a eternidad...” (143)

However, as Marta López-Luaces suggests, the imaginary created by Lorca is also embedded in Western discourses of “Otherness”:

Lorca enfatiza la correspondencia entre la comunidad negra y lo primitivo. Forma a través de su poemario un binarismo entre comunidad negra/modernidad, primitivo/moderno y bueno/malo. Este tipo de binarismo, está en la base de un pensamiento que ha justificado tradicionalmente las jerarquías sociales, raciales y de género. (López-Luaces, 130)<sup>5</sup>

These discourses had been deeply rooted in Spanish society and culture since the beginning of the Empire. It has been argued, in fact, that the largest Black population in Renaissance Europe was located in Spain (Martín and García Barranco 107). Accordingly, Black people had a large representation in the Spanish literature of the Golden Age, in all literary genres, but especially in theatre (García Barranco 153–154).<sup>6</sup> Spanish literary representations of Blacks characterised them as intellectually and socially inferior, as brutes closer to animals than to humans (Santos Morillo 27). The strength of this type of discourse is also evident in the political life in early twentieth-century postcolonial Spain. José Luis Venegas (2009) has analysed, for example, Unamuno’s failure to include Black people in his project of a transatlantic Hispanism that “could restore the international prestige of Spanish culture while overcoming the traumas of four centuries of colonial domination” (Venegas 453).<sup>7</sup> Unamuno’s Hispanic project was based on a cultural notion of “race”

in which the Spanish language was the essential bond that united the former colonies and the mainland in an enduring cultural community. Following Domínguez Burdalo, Unamuno's view of Hispanism "liga lengua con cultura, palabra con hispanidad" and therefore "reincide también en la negación del concepto de raza en su acepción étnica, además de apuntar al mestizaje como ideal proceso de síntesis" (Domínguez Burdalo 330). Under this light, Native Americans and creoles were seen as Spaniards by Unamuno due to their belonging to a Spanish linguistic community. Blacks, on the other hand, were excluded from this community. In the case of "el negro", Unamuno "no mostró hacia él la misma consideración que con indios y mestizos, llegando en muchos casos a defender, o al menos a entender, la esclavitud que especialmente tuvieron que padecer" (Domínguez Burdalo 330). The following quote from Unamuno's review of the novel *En el país de los Bubis* (1931) by José Mas illustrates the persistence of racist discourses that remained unquestioned in Western thought: "esos niños grandes, lúbricos y crueles, borrachos y embusteros, que son los negros, y capaces, sin embargo, hasta de la santidad, pero de una santidad casi vegetal, constituyen uno de los más grandes misterios de la historia" (quoted in Domínguez Burdalo 335).<sup>8</sup> Despite the emphasis placed on the cultural affinities between Spain and its former colonies, nostalgic views of the empire also retained views of "racial" supremacy that had justified colonial domination.

When examining the representation of African Americans in Spanish literary representations of New York, I will therefore refer to recent approaches to primitivism in the arts as explained by Gill Perry, and inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, in which primitivism is seen as "a complex network of sociological, ideological, aesthetic, scientific, anthropological, and legal interests [...] which feed into and determine culture" and emphasize how these discourses involve a relationship of power, and hence "those within Western society who analyse, teach, paint, or reproduce a view of the 'primitive' would, by this activity, be dominating, restructuring and having authority over that which they define as 'primitive'" (Perry 4). As John Jervis also points out, "the sophistication of these modernist explorations, their drive to reflexive awareness, will not save them from an implicit or explicit reproduction of some of the constitutive Western assumptions about otherness" (Jervis 76). As I will show next, whereas Moreno Villa's travelogue reflects this simultaneous fascination towards Black art and the prevalence of discourses of "racial difference" which is characteristic of Primitivist Modernism,

Camba's text is openly imperialist and echoes the nostalgic reassessment of the Empire in the form of "Hispanidad" developed in early postcolonial Spain.

### ***Pruebas de Nueva York: "black dots" on the American flag***

*Pruebas de Nueva York* (1927) was inspired by José Moreno Villa's stay in New York in 1927. The writer travelled to the United States in order to meet the family of his American girlfriend, Florence, and to obtain her father's permission to marry her. The experience resulted in failure, since Moreno Villa was rejected by Florence's parents and returned to Madrid, "recién soltero" in the writer's words, alluding to Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (Ballesteros and Neira 27). During the time he spent in New York, Moreno Villa wrote a series of articles for *El Sol*, published between 19 May and 24 July and subsequently gathered in the volume entitled *Pruebas de Nueva York*. Two years later, he published *Jacinta la pelirroja*, which was inspired by both his relationship with Florence and his experience in New York. *Pruebas de Nueva York* has been mostly regarded by scholarship as a secondary text of mere documentary interest that complements the love story depicted in the aforementioned collection of poems. This widespread view has been promoted in studies such as those by Ballesteros and Neira, where the critics define the text by its "autenticidad de crónica amorosa – correlato en prosa de *Jacinta la pelirroja*" (Ballesteros and Neira 27). Similarly, Díaz de Castro argues that "el ambiente cosmopolita y moderno, las grandes ciudades, la mezcla de razas, las multitudes, la música – y la plástica– del jazz" reflected in *Pruebas de Nueva York* as well as "distintas observaciones sobre la mujer norteamericana" are of great help in order to understand "la figura de Jacinta" (Díaz de Castro 35). Specific studies on *Pruebas de Nueva York* have not significantly gone beyond descriptive approaches to the text in which the view of New York and modernization given by the author is interpreted as the expression of his personal turmoil. Emilio José Álvarez Castaño justifies the author's opinions towards African Americans as the result of a cultural clash between Spain and the United States (Álvarez Castaño 67-68), an approach also taken by Cristóbal Cuevas (311–312) and Dionisio Cañas (156). On the contrary, and in an attempt to supersede the above author-based analyses, I propose that the image of New York developed in *Pruebas de Nueva York* is not a mere reflection of Moreno Villa's failed relationship with Florence or simply of his personal circumstances, but reflects similar attitudes and discourses prevalent in Modernism.



In the last chapter of *Pruebas de Nueva York*, entitled “Puntos Negros” (65–68), José Moreno Villa argues that African Americans and their culture have a strong influence on white Americans. The metaphor “black dots” is used by the writer in order to highlight this impact: “con estos puntos aludo a los individuos de raza negra que motean el país cuadriculado de los Estados Unidos. Puntos negros que deberían figurar en la bandera yanqui alternando con las estrellas rojas [sic]” (65). As he does throughout his travelogue, he declares his intention to offer an objective approach on the subject. However, the writer avoids engaging in the debates about “racial” discrimination taking place in the United States at the time, as he states next: “no se ofendan mis amigos de Nueva York. No siento debilidad por ellos, ni voy a enfocar ceñudamente el problema que aportan a la sociedad” (65). He seems to be alluding to the so-called “Negro problem”, or “Negro question”, two terms that reflected the uneasiness of white Americans with the freedom gained by Blacks thanks to Abraham Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation” in 1863 and the victory of the North over the South in the American Civil War.<sup>9</sup> Moreno Villa aligns himself with Anglo-Saxon Americans, whom he calls “mis amigos”, and declares not to have any “debilidad” towards Blacks, who are referred to as “a problem” and located in a position of subalternity which is never questioned: few paragraphs later, the writer characterises Blacks by alluding to their alleged “índole sumisa, sometida” (66). As such, they occupy the lowest positions of American society, working as servants: “los negros, en su mayoría, se dedican al servicio doméstico. Ellos friegan los cristales de los rascacielos, suben y bajan los ascensores, sirven la mesa [...] mozos de labores secundarias, si no ínfimas” (68). However, and in spite of their social inferiority to white Americans, the writer states that Black servants influence their masters: “es evidente que el criado influye en el amo, y sobre todo, en el ama [...] hay que creer en la influencia de las cosas todas, por humildes, calladas y sumisas que sean. La mera presencia, si es sostenida o constante, acaba por influir sobre uno” (68). The imprint left by the servant on his master is a recurrent theme in Moreno Villa’s work, for example in articles such as “Magisterio de los criados”, “La enseñanza de los pobres” and “Primeras nociones del mundo”, where he highlights the role played by servants in his own education: “las primeras nociones del mundo social o de la condición humana las recibimos de los parientes y de la servidumbre” (“Primeras nociones del mundo” 187); “me siento impulsado por una gratitud, o por un apego sordo, a escribir de unos seres humildes que me rodearon en mi infancia y hasta pudieron influir en mi manera de ver el mundo: los criados, las criadas” (“Magisterio de los criados” 97). Moreno Villa’s appreciation towards his own servants

contrasts with his apparent lack of empathy towards Blacks. Later on, he explains that “nosotros no desdeñamos a nuestros servidores, o, al menos, con el desdén que los americanos a los negros; pero es porque reconocemos la hermandad. Los americanos se sienten de otra estirpe, y esto les defiende del influjo; pero ellos no saben por dónde se cuela éste” (68). This statement could be interpreted as an expression of “racial” difference, in which Spanish servants are recognized as “brothers”, but Blacks would be excluded from such brotherhood. This idea seems to be reinforced in the opening paragraphs of the text, where the author argues that:

sin saber por qué, le adjudicaba yo a todo negro que veía el conocimiento del español y, con ello, un cierto parentesco; pero esta falsa emoción, que sin duda tiene su raíz [sic] en que Cuba fué [sic] nuestra, y que de niño vi negros que castellanizaban y hasta influían en el cante “jondo” con sus “habaneras”, “rumbas” y demás, no acaba de seducirme. No me casaría con una negra. (65)

Following the concept of “Hispanidad” developed by regenerationist projects, it seems at first that Moreno Villa identifies language with national identity, establishing a linguistic brotherhood between the mainland and the colonies. Such kinship is, however, soon rendered as “false” by the writer. He is even categorical about interracial marriage. When compared to previous texts written by the author, this reaction seems contradictory. In 1925, he openly referred to Spaniards as an interracial people: “a primera vista, todos somos moros en Andalucía. Después se nota cierta complejidad en el tipo. Acaso en algún momento parezca que domina el semblante romano de la aristocracia” (“Fisonomía del caserío malagueño” 307); similarly, in 1926 he wrote: “España, que por su judaísmo y por su gitanería sabe de chaleco, cambalache, tira y afloja, regateo...” (“Artistas y mercaderes” 315). Moreover, after his exile to Mexico, Moreno Villa will avoid colonialist attitudes, as his interest in Mexican art and its hybridity (Huerco Cardoso “Los artículos de arte de Moreno Villa” 50-56) and texts such as “Mi españolismo y mi mexicanismo” (233-235) confirm. In the former, he defines Mexican culture as the result of a “fusión carnal” which seems to allude to “racial” mixing: “Nadie puede sostener que la cultura prehispánica se fundió con la española. Quien se fundió fue la persona indígena con la persona ibérica. De modo que esa fusión, constitutiva del mexicano, es puramente somática y psicológica, del cuerpo y del alma” (235). Therefore, why would Moreno Villa react against interracial marriage with a Black woman? In spite of his rejection of Spanish colonialism, the author seems to be influenced by prevalent Western discourses about Black people that characterised them as inferior and only suitable for serving. As Miguel García-Posada has argued regarding Moreno Villa’s depiction of Blacks in his

New York travelogue, he “elude la percepción trágica o simplemente política. Verdad es que la misma izquierda europea, con muy escasas excepciones, mantuvo una mentalidad colonial sobre la cuestión hasta la segunda guerra mundial” (47). In his volume *Locos, enanos, negros y niños palaciegos* (1939), Moreno Villa tells the story of Ángel, the Black servant of his great-grand father, who “no quiso usar de su liberación y murió en casa, fiel a ella, como elemento de la familia” (21). Similarly, in his account of African Americans in *Pruebas de Nueva York*, the writer does not show antipathy nor blatant racism towards Blacks, since he declares his respect and appreciation for the humility of the servants. As he states, “no se trata de simpatía ni antipatía en este momento, sino de apuntar lo que veo” (65). However, the author never questions the position of subalternity in which they are located (and in which they remain even voluntarily, as in Ángel’s case) despite their influence on their masters. Moreover, such influence seems to cause a certain discomfort in the writer, since it is described as silent and hidden process: “[the Black] no se engalla, no levanta cabeza; siente que su escalafón social es ínfimo; pero allá en el fondo de su conciencia le sonreirá la satisfacción de ver que actúa sobre el pensamiento y la sensibilidad de los hombres rubios y fuertes” (65). Instead of highlighting the unfairness of “racial” inequality, Moreno Villa focuses on how Blacks slip their “primitive” influence secretly into the white man’s “civilised” physique. As one can see in the following excerpt, the author resorts to Western stereotypes of subalternity –such as the assumed sensuality and musical skills of the colonised– in order to show the pathway through which such endangering influence purportedly enters American society:

ninguna blanca se abraza con el negro para bailar. Pero el bailarín negro será quien imponga la danza. Y este aspecto de la sensualidad entra en América por él. Por eso digo que actúa sobre los pies y las piernas del americano. Y como a fuerza de danza se adquieren maneras y detalles dinámicos que caben en lo que ya no es danza, sino movimiento general, ademanes de la vida cotidiana, se puede notar en que en las chicas intrépidas hay “monadas” que son negroides, piruetas gráciles que no heredaron de las paquidérmicas razas rubias [...] No puedo figurarme cómo serían los Estados Unidos sin “jazz”. [...] Es posible que este sello que pone la raza negra a las múltiples razas de los Estados Unidos sea momentáneo, transitorio; pero nadie sabe las derivaciones que trae una influencia momentánea si es fuerte. (66)

Although Moreno Villa depicts a case of segregation, in which white women do not mingle with Black men, the author highlights once more the influence that Black culture has on America, even arguing that the Black “race” homogenizes the entire American population. Significantly, the writer highlights the consequences that the exposure to jazz causes in the American “modern

women”; by entering the public space of the jazz club they are transformed by Black music, which extends its influence to their daily life, turning them from members of the “paquidérmicas razas rubias” into “monadas negroides”. Moreno Villa is not clear as to whether this influence has an enriching or a corrupting effect, but he appreciates the musical qualities of jazz music, which “hace bailar al mundo entero con una embriaguez desconocida de nuestros padres envolviendo y electrizando a las naturalezas en las síncopas, quiebros y monotonía de su música peculiar” (66). Similarly, the writer admires the religiosity of the Negro Spirituals and the holiness they bring to American society: “desconozco la profundidad a que alcanzan estas ‘espirituales’ en el alma Americana. Pero me inclino a que no es pequeña, porque tal vez no hay arte más penetrante que el de la música”. Moreno Villa describes the Spirituals as original, mystic and transcendental, and praises their hybridity: “las ceremonias de estos negros recién bautizados tienen un color tan aparte que lo ritual parece recién inventado [...] hay en sus ceremonias una fusión de elementos. [...] Y no brotan en todo momento, sino cuando el ánimo está preparado, cuando llegó poco a poco la embriaguez mística” (67). This admiration will in fact last after his stay in New York, and in 1953 he will recall “los *blues* oídos en Nueva York el año 27, cantados y bailados con un recogimiento digno de una catedral”, which “se me quedaron ahí, en la cinta de la memoria” (“Los años tienen su música” 330). In both cases, Moreno Villa admires the originality of Black music; however, the class divisions sustained in American society by “racial” hierarchy are accepted as normal:

Hay un refrán ruso que dice: “Echad la naturaleza por la puerta, que ella entrará en vuestra casa por la ventana”. Y a los americanos cabría decirles: “Despreciad a vuestros inferiores, que ellos os enseñarán el canto y el baile, la sensualidad y gracia refinadas”. (68)

In this image of rebellious nature – reminiscent of Lorca’s “Danza de la muerte” –, <sup>10</sup> Moreno Villa not only praises the artistic qualities of Blacks, especially their musical talents, but also seems to refer to the idea of a “primitivist regeneration” promoted by modernist art. However, and despite their artistic values, Blacks are still seen as “inferiores”. As Huberto Huergo Cardoso points out, although Moreno Villa “trata con singular perspicacia” the situation of Blacks in the United States and the Spirituals will leave a strong imprint on his memory, they are treated by the writer as an artistic subject rather than individuals: “el negro sí, pero como objeto de contemplación estética” (“Moreno Villa por Moreno Villa” 79). In fact, while he states that “no me casaría con una negra”, his fascination towards Black music will take him to incorporate the rhythm of jazz to the poetic account of his relationship with Florence in *Jacinta la pelirroja*, as he states in its opening verses:

“Eso es, bailaré con ella/ el ritmo roto y negro del jazz. Europa por América” (Moreno Villa 77). He will even express his loneliness, like a blues singer, through the melancholy of Black music, in “Causa de mi soledad”: “¡Ah! y cantor negro/ de un jazz que siento/ a través de diez capas del suelo” (Moreno Villa 112). As he openly declares in his autobiography *Vida en claro*, “quise que apareciera algo del espíritu y la forma sincopada del jazz, que me embriagó en Norteamérica” (Moreno Villa 142). Therefore, Moreno Villa’s account of Blacks in America mirrors the attitudes of the European avant-garde about primitivist art that he had studied prior to his visit to New York. As in the view of Negro art as “primitivist regeneration”, Black music brings a sense of spirituality and renovation to the alleged materialism and excessive puritanism of American society. However, and influenced by prevalent discourses of “Otherness” deeply ingrained in the imaginary of Western modernity, the writer remains incapable of challenging colonialist views of Blacks as inferior beings only suited to serve their white masters.

### **“La España Grande” and “La España Negra” in *La ciudad automática***

*La ciudad automática* compiles the journalistic articles about New York written by Julio Camba for the Spanish newspaper *ABC* between 1931 and 1932. Camba’s view of New York as developed in his travelogue is constructed around the author’s sarcastic approach to modernization. One of the aspects of American society criticized by the writer is the coexistence of different “races”, which is seen as problematic.

Individual studies of *La ciudad automática* are scarce, and mostly follow a rather descriptive approach, often limited to a summary of the ideas expressed by Camba, and without engaging in a critical dialogue with the text, as in the cases of Socorro Girón (183–202), Mónica Álvarez and Ángeles Abuín (29–45) and Álvarez Castaño (81–92). Girón briefly compares Camba’s opinion about Black people to García Lorca’s New York poems (Girón 186), but far from exploring the colonialist implications of Camba’s discourse, she perpetuates similar colonial attitudes based on the dichotomy nature (primitivism)/culture (civilization) in her own analysis, by stating that “el negro conquista al blanco con las armas de su ingenuidad, su inocencia, su arte y su ritmo. Así conquistó a Federico García Lorca y Julio Camba” (Girón 190). Camba’s often ferocious criticism of foreign cultures and his degrading remarks towards different ethnicities has been alleviated by considering it as an expression of his humorous style. Girón, who refers to the

writer as “literato y humorista inconfundible de la Edad de Plata” (12), devotes a chapter of her essay to analyse precisely Camba’s humorous style. Although this scholar argues that “Julio Camba opina sobre la raza y este malabarista de la lengua española es uno de los escritores que más conciencia ha tenido de la misma” (Girón 239), she suggests that the writer “se ríe de lo humano en general” (Girón 218), since “nunca dirige dardos a nadie en particular” (Girón 222–223). Although I do not intend to question the characterization of Camba’s style as humorous, I do consider that this approach has limited the understanding of his New York chronicles. As María Dolores Costa has shown, a critical analysis of Camba’s work should not be limited to the acknowledgement of the writer’s ability to play with words and to satirize American society. In her study of Camba’s travel writing –which contains several references to *La ciudad automática*–, Costa challenges the view of the writer as mere humorist (Costa 154–165). She points out his recurrent use of stereotypes (156–157), and she notes that “Camba’s criticism ultimately serves no didactic function. He does not intend to civilize the ‘barbarians’, simply degrade them” (162). Therefore, I propose that Camba’s humour must be taken seriously. As I will show next, Camba’s assessment of the theoretical –although still precarious– emancipation of African Americans in New York condenses fears of miscegenation and “racial” degeneration, and resorts to colonialist discourses in order to preserve the foundations of a view of Spanish national identity based on “racial difference” and imperialist domination.

In *La ciudad automática*, Julio Camba devotes three chapters to the situation of African Americans in New York: “Negros” (22–23), “Más negros” (24–25) and “Negros y blancos” (25–28). Similarly to Moreno Villa’s travelogue, Camba’s text especially focuses on the contact between African and white Americans, and alludes to the impact that jazz music has on American society. Camba locates the chapter entitled “Negros” in Harlem jazz clubs, where he argues that “racial” hierarchy is blurred by the combined effect of Black music and alcohol:

Nueva York aborrece a los negros, no cabe duda, pero los aborrece únicamente desde las ocho o nueve de la mañana hasta las doce de la noche [...] Es la hora de Harlem. La hora en que los negros más monstruosos estrechan entre sus brazos a las más áureas anglosajonas. La hora en que el alto profesorado, tipo Wilson, se pone a bailar la rumba con la servidumbre femenina de color. [...] si los blancos odian a los negros es, en cierto modo, como el vicioso odia a su vicio. Se ve, en fin que los blancos pueden odiar a los negros durante el día y a las horas laborables, pero que, a pesar de todo, hay algo en el fondo de la raza maldita que los atrae de un modo irresistible. (22–23)

As Rasula points out, the association of jazz with “electric fever” and an atmosphere “charged with alcoholic delirium” was “a characterization pervasive in poetry throughout the period” (23). However, in Camba’s account jazz does not represent freedom, experimentation or “primitivist regeneration” as it did for avant-garde artists. As one can note, in comparison to Moreno Villa’s text, here Anglo-Saxon women are embraced by Black men. Nevertheless, far from condemning the hatred suffered by African Americans in New York, Camba focuses his criticism on the “depraved” behaviour of white Americans, who look for the pleasures forbidden by their puritan values in the dark and debauched clubs of Harlem. Blacks are in fact depicted as a “vice” that white Americans cannot resist, and which leads to “unnatural” sexual matches that destabilise “racial” and class hierarchies. In the couple formed by “negros monstruosos” and “áureas anglosajonas”, the sexual and “racial” purity suggested by the golden hair of Anglo-Saxon women is opposed to the impurity and exacerbated lust (“monstruoso”) of Black men. Regarding the binary white/black, Winthrop Jordan points out that:

embedded in the concept of blackness was its direct opposite – whiteness. No other colors so clearly implied opposition [...] White and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil. (Jordan 42)

Jordan’s words refer to the first encounters between the English and the Africans in the sixteenth century. As one can see, the same racist stereotypes are still in force in Camba’s text. Indeed, the portrait of African Americans given by Camba is a re-elaboration of previous discourses of “Otherness” carried out in the West since its encounter with non-European cultures, based on binary oppositions such as sensuality/rationality, nature/civilization and childishness/maturity. This view is confirmed later on in the chapter entitled “Más negros” (24), where Camba compares African Americans to apes and dogs:

hay negros chiquitines y muy peripuestos que se pasean por las calles de Harlem con una petulancia tan deliciosa como la de un *fox-terrier* [...] otros son enormes, como gorilas [...] bailan los negros *fox-terrier* y los negros *bulldog* [...] baila el negro gorila y el negroide chimpancé. (24–25)

Surprisingly, and in contrast with Moreno Villa’s aim of remaining emotionally neutral, the writer declares later on to have “gran simpatía” (24) for African Americans. Soon we discover that such affection is also explained by Camba’s attachment to discourses of “Otherness”, in this case the infantilization of the “racial Other”:

los niños, en especial, me encantan y, junto a un negro de seis o siete años, un blanco de tres me parece que ya está en plena senectud. En cuanto a los grandes, no hay ninguno que haya dejado enteramente de ser niño. Los negros son niños siempre por su candor y por su marrullería, por su capacidad admirativa, por sus terrores injustificados, a la par que su desconocimiento del verdadero peligro y, ante todo, por la enorme fuerza creadora de su imaginación. (24)

The distinction between whites and Blacks is shown by Camba as a constant that manifests itself even in the earlier periods of human life: both “categories” remain unalterable, since Blacks never overcome this state of childishness and therefore stay in a permanent condition of inferiority in relation to the white man’s maturity. Camba’s view of “races” as fixed categories does certainly echo racist theories such as those argued by Arthur de Gobineau in *The Inequality of Human Races* (1855). According to Gobineau, all “racial differences” were permanent, since “races” “constitute separate branches of one of many primitive stocks” (Gobineau 133).

We shall return to the jazz club, where we find a dancing couple which blurs the “natural” division between social classes: “el alto profesorado, tipo Wilson, se pone a bailar la rumba con la servidumbre femenina de color” (22). Camba seems to react against the “contaminating” influence that Black music has on the American intellectual élite. As Reisigl and Wodak remind us, “race” is a social construction “used as a legitimizing ideological tool to oppress and exploit specific social groups and to deny them access to material, cultural and political resources, to work, welfare services, housing and political rights” (2). Camba is perfectly aware of the racist –and classist– discrimination suffered by African Americans, as he openly refers to the so-called “Negro problem”: “el llamado problema negro ha dejado de ser un problema exclusivamente rural para convertirse también en un problema urbano” (26–27). The writer provides in fact a list of possible “solutions”: “hay quien habla de matar a todos los negros; hay quien habla de echarlos y hasta quien habla de esterilizarlos”, and declares that “cualquiera de estas medidas tiene cierta lógica; pero lo absurdo es eso de separar a los negros de los blancos en el tranvía, en el teatro, en la escuela y hasta en la iglesia” (27). Bearing in mind the humiliating and dehumanizing depiction of Black people given by Camba, it is unsurprising that genocide, banishment, and sterilization are seen by him as “logical”, especially if we consider the pervasiveness of debates about eugenics taking place in both the United States and Europe at the time.<sup>11</sup> However, he also seems to be condemning segregation policies. The following lines clarify this first impression:

¿Para qué separar dos cosas de apariencia tan distinta como un líquido azul y un líquido incoloro? ¿Y para qué separar a los negros de los blancos si salta a la vista del más



miope quiénes son los blancos y quiénes son los negros? [...] Por mi parte opino que el problema negro no existe, y no existe precisamente porque los negros son precisamente una raza de color [...] dentro de su piel cada negro está tan lejos de los otros ciudadanos americanos como un *paragoe* en su campo de concentración. (27-28)<sup>12</sup>

Black skin is compared to a concentration camp that separates African Americans from Anglo-Saxons. As one can see, Camba does not even consider the possibility of egalitarianism: for him, their skin colour will always confine Blacks to a position of subalternity and make visible the inferiority of their “race”. As in *Pruebas de Nueva York*, the emphasis is not placed on “racial” discrimination, but on the subverting power of Black culture. The writer condemns the fact that the “natural” social boundaries established by discrimination become weaker during the night, when Anglo-Saxons become increasingly affected by the intoxicating effect of jazz. The whole scene is given a carnivalesque nature in which the semiotic parallel between “the night” and “the Black” strengthens the idea of temporal madness, of the dangerous and corrupting power of the African American influence. Significantly, the explanation given by Camba for the “irresistible” attraction that Anglo-Saxons feel towards Blacks is reminiscent of Moreno Villa’s words in *Pruebas de Nueva York*:

Todo lo cual tiene una explicación bien sencilla: la falta de lujuria propia en el pueblo americano. [...]. La dictadura puritana arremetió contra toda pasión carnal de un modo verdaderamente feroz, y hoy pueden ustedes ver a este pueblo que, totalmente desprovisto de sus instintos lujuriosos, no tiene más remedio que arreglárselas con la lujuria de otros pueblos. [...] Como la raza anglosajona es una de las razas menos sensuales del mundo, se consideró tarea facilísima el hacer de ella una raza enteramente virtuosa, pero al privarla de su parca sensualidad se la dejó sin defensa contra el estímulo de sensualidades extrañas. (23)

Anglo-Saxons are here ridiculed because of their alleged lack of sensuality, which is considered a flaw rather than a virtue. I suggest that Camba’s words reflect the concerns caused in Spain by theories surrounding Anglo-Saxon superiority over the Latin “races” promoted by authors such as Edmond Demolins in *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons?* (1897), translated into Spanish in 1899 as *¿En qué consiste la superioridad de los anglosajones?* (Fox 112, Seregni 102–102). Such concerns were to a great extent motivated by scientific theories of “race” or “racialism”, which sprang from the evolutionary theories of Darwin, and gave the basis for new ideas of European “racial” supremacy. Lord Salisbury’s speech “Living and Dying Nations”, delivered few months before the end of the war in Cuba, echoed this rhetoric of “racial difference”. In this

discourse, the British Prime Minister argued that nations could be divided in two opposite groups: on the one hand, “great countries of enormous power growing in power every year”, and on the other, “a number of communities which I can only describe as dying” (6). Although Spain was not directly mentioned in the speech, Spanish politicians understood Lord Salisbury’s words as a direct allusion to the situation of their country, since it mirrored the diagnosis given by Spanish intellectuals to the decay of the empire. As Seregni argues:

la idea de raza, con sus corolarios concernientes a la superioridad de algunas y a la degeneración de otras, estaba tan clara y presente en los debates de los políticos, en los discursos de los científicos y en los de los intelectuales que las declaraciones de Salisbury no hacían más que repetir conceptos ya asimilados. (96)

I propose that Camba strives to dismantle racist theories of Anglo-Saxon superiority by showing the counterproductive effects of its excessive search for decency: the alleged suppression of sexual drives by the Protestant faith cannot contain the strength of the lowest instincts, which are attracted by the exacerbated lust of an inferior “race” and lead Americans to fall into the “vices” they try to avoid. Both Camba’s racist stand regarding African Americans and his dialectical efforts to dismantle theories of Anglo-Saxon “racial” superiority can be connected to nostalgic formulations of Spanish national identity after the end of the Empire. As a matter of fact, Harlem reappears in a subsequent chapter significantly entitled “La España negra” (48–51), where the writer describes the East side of this neighbourhood in the following terms:

entre las avenidas quinta y octava, puede decirse que estamos en España. Una España algo negra, desde luego, pero una verdadera España por el idioma, por el carácter y por la actitud general del hombre ante la vida [...] No hay duda de que esto es España, y sólo con espíritu mezquinamente provinciano dejaríamos de reconocerlo así. Es España en toda su enorme variedad histórica. Es la España grande, la España donde nunca se pone el sol todavía, la España hispánica, en una palabra. (48–49)

Camba’s account is a wistful memory of the lost Spanish Empire, of the unity between the mainland and the colonies. The writer praises the grandeur of the former “España grande”, still alive in the linguistic and cultural heritage of the colonies, “la España hispánica”. The success of the Spanish Empire in bonding with the colonies and creating an enduring sense of community contrasts with the Anglo-Saxon failure in the United States. The representation of New York as a city “racially corrupted” conveyed in *La ciudad automática* suggests that Americans have failed to include their subalterns in the national unity without jeopardising the integrity of both their “race” and their culture. In contrast, Camba’s view of a Hispanic unity strives to construct a strong

Spanish national identity based on “racial” and cultural superiority over its colonial Others. In this view, the influence of the subaltern in the “España grande” does not trigger the degeneration of the dominant “race”, but is rather “the Black” who is assimilated to the colonial culture. Hence the efforts to highlight that the so-called “España negra” remains faithful to the linguistic and cultural roots planted by the Spanish Empire in the colonies. In Camba’s text, such nostalgic view of the imperial “España grande”, still alive in the Hispanic heritage of the colonies, together with the view of the United States as a country in danger of becoming “racially” corrupted, attempts to subvert theories of Anglo-Saxon superiority and the worrying image of Spain as a decadent nation which were prevalent at the time.

## Conclusion

In spite of their differences, José Moreno Villa’s *Pruebas de Nueva York* and Julio Camba’s *La ciudad automática* show the strength that colonialist discourses have in Spanish Modernism, especially regarding Black people. Moreno Villa’s travelogue offers a more empathic view of African Americans as humble and hardworking servants, which connects this text with similar appraisals of “los criados” and their influence on their masters written by the author. However, such position of subalternity is never questioned by the writer, who prefers not to discuss the dominant racism of American society at the time. This does not stop him from admiring Black music, especially jazz and the Negro Spirituals, which he praises for their beauty and originality. Moreno Villa’s attitude reflects widespread reactions to primitive art by the European avant-garde, which turned Black people into fascinating and often mysterious objects of contemplation without engaging with the problems caused by discrimination and segregation suffered by these individuals in the United States and the long history of colonization and domination of the “Other” which is at the core of Western civilization. By contrast, *La ciudad automática* openly presents the influence of Blacks in American society as corrupting. In this case there is not even aesthetic esteem for primitive art, but rather a blatant perpetuation of a series of stereotypes and discourses of “Otherness” in which Blacks are characterised as luxurious, infantile and inferior beings who are even animalized as dogs and apes. Apart from its obvious racism (dominant in Western thought), Camba’s text also strives to reverse contemporary views of Anglo-Saxon superiority and the worrying diagnosis that characterized Spain as a dying nation, therefore preserving an

imperialistic view not only based on cultural domination in the form of “Hispanidad”, but also on “racial hierarchy” between the white master and the Black subaltern.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some examples of Spanish travelogues set in New York and published during 1900-1936 include: Eduardo Zamacois, *Dos años en América: impresiones de un viaje por Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Chile, Brasil, New-York y Cuba* (1912), Mariano Alarcón, *Impresiones de un viaje a New-York* (1918), Eduardo Criado Requena, *La ciudad de los rascacielos* (1919), Luis Araquistáin, *El peligro yanqui* (1921), Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* (Chapter 2: “La ciudad que venció a la noche”) (1924), Joaquín Belda, *En el país del bluff. Veinte días en Nueva York* (1926), Jacinto Miquelarena, ... *Pero ellos no tienen bananas (El viaje a Nueva York)* (1930), Pedro Segura, *Nueva York 1935: impresiones de un viaje a los Estados Unidos* (1935). See also Isabel García-Montón, *Viaje a la modernidad: la visión de los Estados Unidos en la España finisecular* (2002), an anthology of Spanish narrative texts set in New York and published between 1875 and 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Here I refer to the first edition; however, the editions I will follow are *Pruebas de Nueva York* (1989) and *La ciudad automática* (1960).

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), *The Myth of Primitivism*, ed. by Susan Miller (New York: Routledge, 1991), Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), Frances Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), *Primitivism and Twentieth-century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. by Jack Donald Flam and Miriam Deutch (California: University of California Press, 2003), and Carol Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism and Primitivism, 1919-1935* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004). Jed Rasula also mentions specific studies on the fascination exerted by jazz music on the European avant-garde: Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> For more examples, see William T. Spoorri’s *The Old World and the New. A Synopsis of Current European Views on American Civilization* (1937, first published in 1936), Allan Nevins’ *America Through British Eyes* (1968, first published in 1948), and Olga Peters Hasty and Susanne Fusso’s *America through Russian Eyes, 1874–1926* (1988).

<sup>5</sup> Although it is out of the scope of this article, a postcolonial reading of *Poeta en Nueva York* seems necessary and would shed new light into García Lorca's text.

<sup>6</sup> See also Baltasar Fra Molinero's *La imagen de los negros en el teatro del Siglo de Oro* (Cerro de Agua; Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> For a study of the literary concept of *Hispanismo* at the turn of the century, see John E. Englekirk's "El Hispanoamericanismo y la Generación del 98" (*Revista Iberoamericana* 2: 321–51, 1940).

<sup>8</sup> *En el país de los Bubis*, recently re-edited by Ediciones del Viento in 2010, narrates the author's autobiographical experience in Africa.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, despite the abolition of slavery in 1865 and the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1870, which guaranteed suffrage to all American men regardless of their "race" (Gamber 305), racism was not eradicated in the United States. In 1916, escaping from the segregation policies of the South and attracted by the job opportunities offered by the Northern industry, around two million African Americans migrated to the cities of the North, West and Midwest (Turner-Sadler 104). New York, in particular, became the American city with the biggest black population in the country, with 60,000 African Americans in 1910-1920 and rising to 327,706 in 1920-1930 (Grant Meyer 32). Their arrival in the North was received with increasingly violent racist displays. Although segregation was illegal, discrimination was perpetuated in the form of a "de facto" segregation: whites reached informal agreements in order to reduce job and housing opportunities for blacks, who despite having the right to vote had little political visibility, since the majority of elected officials were white and ignored their African American counterparts (Turner-Sadler 104).

<sup>10</sup> It is not known whether García Lorca had read Moreno Villa's New York chronicles before he travelled to this city, although some critics have suggested that the poet from Granada was familiar with this text. García-Posada argues that "Lorca sin duda lo leyó" (47) and Dionisio Cañas points out the similarities between Moreno Villa's travelogue and the opinions expressed by García Lorca in his letters and the *Conferencia-Recital* (Cañas 154), to the extent that he states: "unos años después vendrá Lorca a Manhattan y, aunque no sabemos si leyó el libro de Moreno Villa –posiblemente tuvo acceso a los artículos conforme fueron saliendo en la prensa– las coincidencias en la actitud de Lorca frente a Nueva York son tantas que es difícil no pensar que ciertas 'ideas hechas', respecto a la ciudad, no provienen ya del texto del primero" (Cañas 158).

<sup>11</sup> Álvarez Chillida points out that the debates about eugenics arrived in Spain in the 1920s. The "Primeras Jornadas Eugenésicas Españolas" were organized in Madrid in 1928 and 1933 (224).

<sup>12</sup> I have not been able to find the meaning of the word "paragoe". I can only deduce that Camba is misspelling "Arapahoe" and he is referring to Indian reservations.

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